

Henry Duff Traill

THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR



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THE NEW FICTION

AND OTHER

ESSAYS ON LITERARY SUBJECTS

BY

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THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR

AMONG many signs of a growing recognition of human brotherhood not the least notable are the praiseworthy attempts of 'the peoples' to understand and, if possible, appreciate each other's recorded jokes. There is an element of the humorous in the very endeavour. It assumes, to begin with, that a joke, whether considered as a natural or, as is too often the case, a manufactured product, is necessarily a subject of international exchange. This is, from the economical point of view, a curious theory, which apparently implies that though all, or at any rate most, nations produce their own jokes some in greater, some in less quantity, but usually in an amount sufficient to supply the home market, and to render the native consumer independent of foreign supplies, it is, nevertheless, at his option to vary the quality of the consumable product to any extent by taking consignments of it from abroad. It is a mere question of the

cost and difficulty of transport, which latter word, it should be noted, is etymologically almost identical with the word 'translation.' These matters arranged, and the foreign joke delivered safely to the purchaser, he has nothing to do but to sit down to its enjoyment; and this with as absolute an assurance of relishing it, even though 'made in Germany,' as the *gourmet* feels in opening a jar of Russian caviare. If the taste disappoints him he attributes the defect to the fault of the intermediary, and reproaches the translator as a consignee of goods would reproach a slovenly packer through whose negligent performance of his duty they had 'gone bad' in transit. That the goods may be quite unsuited to his taste, or outside the range of his appreciation, never seems to occur to him, still less that before their consignment they may have already deteriorated, even in the country of their production.

This conception of the joke as in itself an imperishable creation, a permanent addition to the world's wealth, and fit companion of the serious work of Thucydides, as a 'possession for ever,' is really very humorous, when you come to reflect upon it. It is almost as humorous, indeed, as Mr. Labouchere's theory of poetry, which he regards, as he would coal or iron, solely from the point of view of the realised product, and not at all from that of the productive energy, arguing therefrom that since the

world has accumulated enough of the former the latter should now cease. 'We have,' he once wrote in comment upon some remarks of mine, 'already enough of the article'—that is poetry—'which has come down to us from former generations, and time has taken care that only what is good and sound has reached us. Why, then, should we trouble to read any more?' And, therefore, why trouble to write, or, at any rate, to print, any more? 'Poetry,' in fact, means 'poems' to Mr. Labouchere in precisely the same way and to the same extent as 'coal-mining' means 'coal.' You examine your stocks of both commodities, find you have enough, and cease demanding; whereupon down go profits and up come strikes in one of the two businesses, though not, curiously enough, in the other. In the same way it is quite clear that to a great many worthy people 'humour' means the contents of a jest-book. If there are many jest-books in existence, in your own and other languages, then you are well supplied with humour, and, as far as you are concerned, there is no reason why the 'humourist' should go on producing any more. It is true that there is more of a prejudice against jocularity 'which has come down to us from former generations' than there is against poetry of a similarly imposing length of descent, and that the 'good and sound' joke does not in all circles enjoy the respect that is paid to seasoned and

well-preserved verse. Still, there is a considerable class of consumers who are quite satisfied with it even in its original state, and, unlike the poem, it is capable of being, and constantly is, 'worked up' again into new and attractive forms.

We need not, however, trouble ourselves about those excellent and most fortunate persons to whom the old, in all kinds, even in the humorous, is preferable to the new. Long may they live and flourish, and when they die, may the lapidary have the brilliant inspiration of inscribing 'Affliction sore,' or 'To live in hearts we leave behind,' on their tombstones, while Joe Miller acts as their Virgil through the Elysian Fields. Byron, I think it is, who in a note to one of his poems describes a certain country gentleman as one who 'would have the same joint for dinner every Sunday in order that he might make the same joke upon it.' Which of us with a sense of humour would be able, if he were a weekly guest of the squire, to help sharing in this amusement, tickled not, perhaps, by the jest, but at any rate by the laughter? And who will deny that the simple souls who have but one joke, and never tire of it, do themselves contribute in no small measure to the not unkindly mirth of the world?

It is with that more sophisticated and fastidious person who craves for novelty in his funniments that I am just now concerned. For it is a serious matter,

when you come to think of it, that humour should 'wear out.' Relative as our perceptions may be, they manage in other provinces of thought and feeling to keep up a respectable appearance of the absolute and the universal, of the unchangeable from age to age, and the indistinguishable as between nation and nation. The sublime, the terrible, the tender, the pathetic—there *does* seem to be some common international standard of these qualities; it is possible (continues our 'self-torturing sophist') to say, with a rough approximation to truth, that those written words which move a reader of one civilised nationality to awe or pity, which stir him to delight in the imaginative contemplation of Nature, or agitate him by the vivid portrayal of human passion, will, as a rule, produce the same effect in kind upon all readers of the same average level of intelligence, to whatever race they may belong. Of course (he admits) the effect may differ widely in degree. Dutch sublimity may only moderately impress me, and Norwegian pathos may leave me comparatively cold. Yet still I recognise the fact that both the pathos and the sublimity appeal, in their several degrees, successfully to the same emotions as are swayed by Shakespeare and Milton. But with what truth can I say of some of the jests which tickled the reader of Hierocles, or of thousands of others which have no doubt shaken millions of midriffs since that

Greek Joe Miller's day, that they appeal even faintly to those emotions which are swayed by Swift and Sterne, by Fielding and Dickens? So far from doing this, they 'reverse the engine,' so to speak; they set the emotional machinery working in precisely the opposite direction.

It is not a mere effect of time, either; or, at least, it cannot be that alone. For age does not wither nor custom stale the beauties of serious literature. People have not yet begun to think that the prayer of Priam to Achilles is poor stuff; or that Lucretius' description of the gods and their abode is fustian; or that Dante has spoilt the story of Paolo and Francesca. The judicious critic does not propose to obelise all the lines from 'The cloud-capped towers' down to 'is rounded with a sleep' inclusive; though the manager about to produce *The Tempest* might very likely pronounce them 'cackle,' and mark them with the blue pencil as 'to be omitted in representation.' We still read *Lycidas* with pleasure, and would hardly consent to strike out even the 'No Popery' part about the 'wolf with privy paw.' Even on lower literary levels good things of the serious description contrive to last. We still find Swift's account of the Struldbrugs passably impressive, and we do not set down Horne Tooke as a mere watery-headed 'cry-baby,' because the stern pathos of the closing paragraph of his enemy Johnson's Preface to the Dictionary affected

him to tears. It is humour alone which will not wear: it happens only to the joke to seem exquisite to the men of one age, and imbecile to the men of another; and this difference (concludes our despairing sceptic) must be due to something essentially perishable, something fundamentally relative, limited, occasional, about humour and its products. Who can know, then, what is its 'true inwardness,' how and in what form it can be assured of survival, or whether it is destined to survive in any form at all?

These, no doubt, are melancholy—even desolating—thoughts and questions; but I am not sure that the evocation of them will be without its salutary effects. The alarmist will get over his apprehensions as to the disappearance of humour when he has attained to a more accurate conception of what that peculiar faculty is; and in working his way to this he will find abundant consolation for the gradual decay of its successive products, and even for the circumstance that they are not in all cases suitable subjects of international exchange.

It would be hardly safe, perhaps, to affirm with absolute confidence that any one human energy is, as such, indestructible, still less that no such energy is transformable out of recognition in the course of the World-Process. It is possible to maintain, as a pessimistic thesis, that even the poetic instinct and

faculty will in course of time disappear; that its period of greatest strength is coincident with comparatively early stages of human development, and that, like the measles and other maladies which take such masterful hold of primitive races, its power is progressively declining with the advance of civilisation. At present, however, there are no signs of this; indeed, such signs as there are altogether 'contra-indicate' it, as doctors say; and on present appearances one would be disposed to hold that, whether our supply of the poetic product (warranted 'good and sound') be sufficient or not, or whether, if insufficient, the contemporary producer be capable or incapable of making any real addition to it, the work of poetic production is likely to continue, and to continue at an increasing rate.

So with humour. It is possible, as a pessimistic thesis, to maintain the probability of its effacement from the list of human energies; and it must be sorrowfully admitted, especially when we study certain results of the energising of the humorous faculty, that it seems to possess the less effective vitality of the two; but the contingency of its future disappearance seems practically as problematical and remote. Humour, like poetry, is the habit of contemplating, and of being affected by, the facts of consciousness in a particular way. It sees the mutual relations of thoughts, things, and persons—that is to

say, of thoughts to each other, of things and persons to each other, and of thoughts to things and persons—under an aspect, just as poetry does, of its own. Poetry unveils the hidden beauty, humour exposes the lurking incongruity, of these relations; and the charm of the humorous as of the poetic product varies directly as the sum of three ingredients—first, the objective truth and force of the revelation; secondly, its novelty and unexpectedness *as* such revelation; and thirdly, the subjective skill with which it is effected. In the greatest humorists, as in the greatest poets, all these three contributories touch their maximum. In their case the illuminant, humorous or poetic, is the most powerful and the most commandingly directed, and the illuminated object the most delightfully surprising in its new aspect. It is their chiefest triumph to transfigure with beauty and renew with humour those common things on which the careless eye of the world has rested, unsuspecting of their secret charm, a thousand times.

But all this is only true of the greatest in either kind; and where the poet or the humorist is something less than supreme he rarely has that magical gift of handling the ‘eternally common’ which will assure his work of sharing the perpetuity of its material. People see this clearly enough in the case of poetry, and are apparently resigned to it. At any

rate, they do not seem to distress themselves—I am not now speaking of Mr. Labouchere alone—at the reflection that the heritage of ‘good and sound poetry’ which has come down to us from former generations is small indeed compared to the total amount of the poetry which was regarded—and surely some of it justly—as ‘good and sound’ at the time of its production. In other words, they acquiesce philosophically enough in the fact that poetry—that is, some poetry—can grow old and perish, while they seem to be dismayed at the thought that humour—that is, some humour—is of the fashion that passeth away.

Of course, the actual discovery that it *is* of this fashion—at any rate when that discovery is made in the work of some dearly-loved humorist of one’s youth—is indefinitely the more painful of the two. That is for the reason already referred to: namely, that humour which fails to give its intended pleasure gives positive pain—a pain which is not in the smallest degree mitigated by the literary skill with which the product is presented. Better a thousand times to be a poet of a mode outworn than a *rococo* humorist; for the former, though banished from the common household of man, may in virtue of his style possess an eternal refuge in the temple of letters. What human heart is moved in these days by the poetry of Pope, yet what lover of the art of literature

has it ceased, or will it ever cease, to delight? The rhetorical passion which leaves him cold does not offend him; the decay of its once prized 'poetic beauties' detracts no whit from his enjoyment of its grace, its elegance, its matchless skill; nay, perhaps their charm is heightened by that scent of faded flowers. But think of the difference for a devoted Dickensian who suddenly finds himself confronted with some well-known passage of the master's 'high jinks,' the delight of his admirer's early youth, but now all gone flat—its humours changed into mere mechanical clowning from which all the spirit has departed! The writing is as good as ever, the movement of the scene as brisk, the technical skill of the whole, in short, as admirable as ever. But do these qualities console the disenchanted worshipper? Can he even bear to linger over the page in the hope that they may yield him consolation? No, he turns the leaf, perhaps closes the book, with a curious emotion of shame; to examine the vainly-grinning jest more closely would seem a kind of impiety. He almost feels like one who has unwittingly 'uncovered the nakedness of his father.'

Yet he is wrong to close the book, though right enough to turn the leaf; for if he has the courage to face the loss of some of his early illusions, he will find much happy and refreshing confirmation of his early tastes. If the critic in him should be, as it is

in some of us, for good or evil, not so *very* many years younger than the man, he will never have been able to accept *all* the Dickensian humour with absolute unreserve. Nay, even the comparatively uncritical youth of five-and-thirty years ago—a far less precocious period than the present—could not away with the whole of it; so that as regards some of its more exuberant mirth-making there is no illusion to destroy. Much of the rest, however, and that very often of the broadest, is still vital; it only needs that the breadth of the caricature should have some broadly human vice or foible to sustain it. There was always genius in its very exaggeration, and that genius will be found in most cases to have kept it alive. It is only, after all, the too narrowly local, the too eccentrically individual element, which has perished.

No doubt it is a blow to find—if we do find—that the humours of *Pickwick* have largely staled, and that we can no longer laugh as erst we laughed at the cockneyisms of Sam Weller. Yet, at least, the noble and impossible Pecksniff is still left to us almost as fresh as ever, and the fun of Todgers's—that Pension Vauquer of a more genial Balzac—groweth not old. Even Mrs. Gamp, now fallen unamusing as to her more than human perversions of articulate speech, is, beneath her lifeless *bizarrierie* of externals, living still. We feel it when she sits down to tea with Mrs. Prig.

Her type has perished and passed away, but there is that in her—as there seems not to be in Sam Weller, a more purely stage construction—which holds of human nature and survives. The ‘sick and monthly’ of fifty years ago may have been folded up like a vesture and changed; but greed and cunning, vanity and unscrupulousness and gross animalism, and the semi-salacious interest of the lower order of womankind in the reproductive side of life—these are permanent human characteristics; and fused into one comic whole with the humour of unconsciousness it seems that they have power to delight us still.

Generally, therefore, we may venture, for the benefit of the too serious and desponding persons to whom I have referred, to hazard the proposition that Nature as exhibited in the human race, is not yet played out; nay, that in respect of her inexhaustible power of supplying art with perennially fresh material, she should be recognised as no less a ‘rum ’un’ by the present generation than by the age of Mr. Wackford Squeers. Only she cannot be expected to admit parentage of every artistic product, humorous or other, which one seeks to ‘mother’ upon her, and to shelter it as such for ever from the wasting hand of time. She will not do this even for a Dickens, as she has not done it even for a Sterne. She takes only from the hand of every romancer and every humorist, great or small, such children of his begetting

as are clearly stamped with her own image; such contrasts of character, such paradoxes of thought, such incongruities of association, as are drawn from her own bosom or ordered by her own hand; and the residue she relentlessly lets go. The loss of all that, from age to age, is certain, and may occasionally be painful; but it is not more certain than the preservation of what Nature has 'quoted and signed' as fit to be preserved. Hence let no one fear—as, perhaps, none do fear, save those defectively humorous persons who cling with such pathetic anxiety to the jest-book—that the written record of Humour is not as imperishable a part of man's spiritual possessions as the deposit of Poetry.

Whether it will be largely added to in the future is another question. That depends—it is less a truism than it seems to say so—on the persistence of the creative faculty as distinct from the appreciative sense of humour among civilised races. And there is not quite enough reassurance in saying that this faculty, having now become thoroughly 'organised' in the mental constitution of man, is not likely to disappear altogether. Perhaps not; but one cannot escape a fear that it may by degrees become dormant, or fall, so to speak, 'into abeyance'—like a peerage on failure of male heirs. One cannot help observing that the exercise even of the appreciative sense of humour appears to require a certain elasticity of the emotions,

which, to put it mildly, does not seem to be becoming a more common quality than it was. The young man whom one pronounces to be destitute of a sense of humour is not always intellectually incapable of perceiving the incongruous in human life; or even the incongruous in his own person, position, and conduct. But the perception is a strictly intellectual one: it gives him no pleasure, but rather pain; the last thing we should expect of it is that it should provoke him to a laugh.

It is contended, I am aware, in some highly optimistic quarters that this proves nothing. We have become less demonstrative than our fathers, that is all; and we do not enjoy our humour any less than they did because we do not give such noisy expression to our amusement. I confess to regarding this as a very dangerous doctrine. True as it undoubtedly is that some of the most exquisite humour in the world is the most silently enjoyed, I have never myself met a thorough appreciator of this form of humour who was proof against that importunate demand which some sudden flashes of the humorous make upon one for an audible response. The power of laughter, and of hearty laughter—so far, at least, as my own experience goes—almost always accompanies a keen *emotional* sense of humour. As to the mere intellectual appreciation of it I say nothing; that power, which is, no doubt, possessed in a high degree by the

Devil, is of little value to mankind. But I should doubt myself whether this emotional sense of humour—this capacity not only for perceiving the incongruous, but for *taking pleasure* in the sight—is ever accompanied by an inability to laugh. Among that very low-typed Oriental race, the Veddahs of Ceylon, this inability is said to be absolute; but my own inference from that, which I give for what it is worth, is that the Veddahs of Ceylon do not understand a joke.

I am not aware, however, that the point has ever been definitely settled, and since, in view of the growing seriousness of our young men, it is beginning to assume scientific importance, I suggest that steps should be taken to determine it once for all. A committee of ethnologists charged with the duty of investigating the matter might be despatched to Ceylon, where the Bishop of Colombo, himself a genuine humorist, and part author, in his pre-episcopal days, of one of the happiest academic skits ever written, would, I am sure, be glad to render them any assistance in his power. Translations of a few of the most approved works of our latest humorists might be presented to this interesting people for perusal, and the result observed and recorded. If it proved that although incapable of laughing at these pleasantries they had an intellectual appreciation of them—that is to say, that they could point out, if

only geographically, as it were, the exact spot on the printed page at which the laughter they are themselves incapable of supplying is intended to 'come in'—well, in that case their state would not be much less gracious than that of many old-fashioned people among ourselves. At any rate, the result of the experiment would be full of hope for the future of a country so many of whose most intellectual young men are in the habit of taking themselves almost as seriously as the Veddahs of Ceylon.

Meanwhile, and in the painful uncertainty of the present outlook, it is not surprising that the psychologist should come to the assistance of his fellow-citizens, and endeavour by analytic investigation of this apparently disappearing quality and by discovery of its true inwardness, to enable us to save it from extinction. If, argues he, we could only find out exactly what humour is 'in its quiddity,' we could keep ourselves humorous, or at any rate bring up our children to be so. This is very good of the psychologist: it is like his kindness; and his attempt to console and encourage us by these inquiries is the more praiseworthy because, from the popular point of view, the task is so essentially a thankless one.

There are indeed few studies which are pursued by the philosopher under such severe discouragements from simple and subtle alike. He soon finds that those who take any serious interest in the in-

quiry are far too intent upon the establishment of their own theories to pay any attention to his; while as to the general public, they are precluded by an incurable levity from considering the matter with any seriousness at all. Indeed, they are apt to find something unspeakably ridiculous in the mere fact that, despite its subject, there is no more fun in it than there is in other psychological inquiries—that, in fact, the analyst of the Humorous is not, or not at that moment, and in that capacity, a humorist. This, of course, is a preposterous injustice. It is worse than requiring the man who drives fat oxen to be himself as fat; it is to insist that he should be equally good to eat. Nothing, for instance, could have been more amusing in their irrelevance than were many of the newspaper comments on Mr. W. S. Lilly's recent investigation of this subject. Some of these dashing commentators showed evident signs of disappointment at not finding the 'Theory of the Ludicrous' more amusing; others were excited to scornful mirth by its logical method and arrangement. One of them found that 'a philosopher analysing jokes is a bit of a joke himself;' and I have no doubt at all that many a reader chuckled assent to the proposition. Mr. Lilly enumerated twenty-one forms of the Ludicrous, beginning with Humour and ending with Practical Joking; and at this also the critic from whom I have quoted was hugely tickled. The

idea of a man gravely counting the number of different ways in which one can be made to laugh! It was too absurd! The philosopher who could do such a thing may possibly have attained to a certain cold intellectual comprehension of a joke; but he cannot have the true sympathetic appreciation of humour, or he would be unable to contemplate the incongruity of his own position with unmoved muscles.

All this is very disheartening to analysts of the ludicrous, and has prevented at least one of them from taking a hand at the game (though it is one which he enjoys greatly) for some years past. Another discouragement which the analyst feels acutely is that his speculations are in like case with those of Dr. Primrose: they are addressed to the learned world, but the learned world takes no notice of them whatever. Perhaps the individual analyst has no right to complain, for he never notices the analysis of anyone else, or not, at least, of anyone later than Sydney Smith. We all begin with Sydney Smith and his famous dissertation in the *Edinburgh Review* article on 'Irish Bulls,' though Mr. Lilly only does so in order to dismiss the Canon's definition of humour as a 'surprising proposition:' which no doubt it does seem to be when taken in connection with the infelicitous examples which Sydney gives. But for one who has endeavoured to pursue the analysis

further, and who believes himself to have worked out the much-debated distinction between Wit and Humour in a formula, to which the only possible objection is that it seems far too symmetrical to be sound—for such an one, I say, to find that his labours have passed absolutely unnoticed by a fellow-inquirer (and how much more certainly, therefore, by an incurious and unpsychological public), there is good excuse for feeling something of the disappointment of Mr. Walter Shandy, when, master though he was of one of the finest chains of reasoning in the world, he was unable, for the life of him, to get a single link of it into the head of his wife.

No attempt, however, will here be made to subject the public to the cranial operation which would evidently have been necessary in the case of Mrs. Shandy. The analytic process referred to shall not be repeated in these pages. It will be enough to borrow one of them for a concise statement of its results.

They are embodied in the following propositions :

1. Wit and Humour, which have sometimes been treated as different results or aspects of the same mental process, are in reality the respective products of two diametrically opposed operations of the mind.

2. Wit consists in the revelation of unsuspected similarity between two otherwise dissimilar objects of thought.
3. Humour consists in the display (though not necessarily the *revelation*) of incongruity between two otherwise associable objects of thought.
4. Revelation being essential to wit, though not to humour, it follows that the element of surprise is a uniform constituent of the effect produced by the former, though not of that produced by the latter.
5. All incongruity implies dissimilarity; but not *e converso*, dissimilarity being recognised by a purely intellectual apprehension, while incongruity exists only between such dissimilars as cannot be united in thought without producing an *emotional* shock.
6. The 'passion of laughter' is excited by incongruity alone. Humour, therefore, in its various forms, is the sole excitant of laughter.
7. The response to wit, *as such*, is not laughter, but merely that more sedate form of pleasurable emotion which the sudden discovery of fitness brought about by human

ingenuity—as in a clever mechanical invention, or the ingenious solution of a problem—is accustomed to evoke.

8. The fact that laughter is a frequent accompaniment of the response to wit is due to the fact that the objects between which wit reveals similarity are often not only dissimilar, but incongruous also, and their union in thought produces the emotional shock which is the characteristic effect of humour.

Several more propositions in the nature of corollaries to the foregoing might easily—perhaps only too easily—be added; but I refrain. The first and the last three will quite suffice, I feel sure, to provoke the vehement opposition of all those rival theorists who do not prefer to treat them with an even more vehement neglect. Space does not permit me to support them with examples, but it will be easy for anyone who doubts their soundness, especially that of No. 8, to test it by examples. Everybody who has any intelligent appreciation of wit will at once admit that over and above the epigrams, repartees, and *bons mots*, which have excited his mirth as well as admiration, he has heard in conversation, or met with in reading, an immense number of brilliant phrases, felicitous illustrations, apt comparisons, and other indubitable and indisputable specimens of wit

which have afforded him keen intellectual pleasure, without, however, provoking in him the slightest inclination to laugh. If, then, he will compare these specimens with those which have the power of exciting laughter, he will find that in every instance of the latter kind the wit has brought two incongruous objects into mental association; and has thus produced that emotional shock that results from collision between ideas which, like the sublime and the ignoble, the comic and the tragic, the poetic and the prosaic, are respectively contemplated in two different *moods* of mind. For it is in the sudden descent or ascent from one of these moods that the emotions get their shock, and by a simple physiological process, which Mr. Herbert Spencer's explanation will presently be quoted to elucidate, laughter ensues.

Perhaps, however, I have lingered long enough on a side of the subject in which only a very small minority are interested. The British public, with its resolute practicality, has never taken kindly to analysis. It is essentially a synthetic public. It 'drives at practice,' as Mr. Matthew Arnold used to say of somebody else; and its secret sympathies have always been with Mr. Squeers, when, after instructing his pupils in the orthography—or rather heterography—of the word 'winder,' he sends him away to clean one. It is tolerably certain that if

one were to write quite a thick volume on the Analysis of the Humorous, with specimens of humour (constructed as per analysis) at the end, the public would turn to the last page first, just for all the world as if the treatise were a sensation novel. Ever driving at practice, our people would hasten to examine these concrete examples of the humorous with the view of ascertaining beforehand whether a study of its abstract principles would be likely to repay them by developing the faculty in question.

Nor is there any doubt that, in secret, they suspect the soundness of any psychological reasoning on this subject which the psychologist is unable to prove by practice. The analyst, it is plain to see, is often uneasily conscious of this; and sometimes he longs to work out synthetically the demonstration of his theories. But it is when synthesis succeeds to analysis that disappointment ensues. You may work out your Theory of the Ludicrous with triumphant thoroughness; but when you pass from theory to practice, when you attempt to reintegrate your resolved ingredients and turn out a properly compounded joke, then it is that you find yourself face to face with the real difficulty. You get your two 'incongruous objects,' you excogitate your 'concept,' 'subsume' the former under the latter; and you let off your little joke. And lo! nobody laughs. Everything has been done according to rule. If you

doubt it, you look up your Schopenhauer and satisfy yourself. Perhaps you re-read the famous passage justly praised by Mr. Lilly from Isaac Barrow, or you take a turn at your Sydney Smith. According to all these authorities you have been humorous; you have scrupulously followed the instructions of the learned, and you are rewarded with the quiet conscience of the painstaking though unsuccessful artist. But the fact remains that you have failed to evoke that response from your audience without which even the most self-sufficient and stoical of jesters is rarely content. You have not made anybody laugh.

It may be that, as the world grows older, sadder, more fastidious, its humorists may learn to be content with the reward of their own consciences, and will cease to expect anybody to laugh. Perhaps, having themselves grown more philosophical, they will argue that the intrinsic merit of a joke, or even its projected power of amusing, can have little or nothing to do with anything so purely physical as that meaningless agitation of the abdominal and other muscles which we describe as laughter. True, it is a muscular convulsion of very ancient origin, and interesting to the biologist on that account. But so also are the primitive and rudimentary forms of humour: there is, indeed, a stage in human civilisation at which humour is as simple and as practical as laughter itself.

Let us, for instance, endeavour to conjure up to our imagination that scene of artless jollity—the old-fashioned country fair. Behold that circle of chubby bumpkins, each with his blowsy, apple-cheeked sweetheart at his side, and note that leathern ellipsoidal ring raised some five feet from the ground and fixed in that position, midmost the village green. As Victor Hugo would ask and answer in similar circumstances :

‘What is it? It is a horse-collar.’

All eyes are bent eagerly on the empty frame, and all await with tense expectancy the ‘living picture’ who is about to fill it. Many others have filled it already with more or less credit, but it is in the prowess of Giles Joskin that the knowing ones believe. See! Giles is here. Lightly, confidently, he steps up to the collar, and in another moment there appears through its aperture, framed but ill-confined within it, the ‘too vast orb’ of his face. There is a moment’s pause, during which the spectators critically survey the champion’s countenance, red and round as a foggy sun; and then, in a moment, the ruddy disc is suddenly cloven in twain by a horizontal fissure, which lengthening laterally and broadening vertically, like the chasm which swallowed the three rebels against Moses and Aaron, touches at last the sides of its environment, and bisects, at its

short axis, the leathern ellipse. It is Giles Joskin's smile: a smile which all who see it recognise as victorious; and as the judge approaches with the prize of victory in his hand, and announces that Giles has carried off the flitch of bacon, to be awarded to him who should grin most effectively through the horse-collar, the welkin rings with rustic guffaws.

What has happened? Psychologically and physiologically, what has happened? There is no real doubt on either point; both have been well ascertained. Explained in terms of the emotions, the laughter of the tickled yokels is the expression of the 'sudden glory' of Hobbes—that glory 'arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves as compared with the infirmities of others.' Giles Joskin's grin—nay, his mere willingness to grin for the entertainment of the village—is the 'infirmity' which excites their sudden glory. For a flitch of bacon and the barren honour of exhibiting the biggest mouth in the country-side he has publicly made an ass of himself, while we (glorious thought!) we, his neighbours, are sitting here, eminent, superior, not grinning through horse-collars ourselves, but laughing at the ugliness and despising the shamelessness of those who do.

Explained in terms of the nervo-muscular functions, the case is equally clear. 'A large amount of

nervous energy,' says Mr. Herbert Spencer, 'instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotions which were nascent' (with reference namely to Giles Joskin's chances of success) 'is suddenly checked in its flow' (that is to say, by the apparition of Giles's grin, and the instantaneous conviction that such an incomparable *rictus* must inevitably carry off the prize). 'The excess must discharge itself in some other direction, and there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter.'

No doubt this explanation is physiologically complete. Audrey giggling behind her beefy hand; her hee-hawing swain with palms pressed upon his Sunday waistcoat; the aged hedger who has broken his 'churchwarden' between his toothless gums in the convulsions of his mirth, are all simply working off an excess of nervous energy through the muscles of the jaws, thorax, and abdomen. So far all is plain sailing. Where the difficulty arises, that difficulty which so besets us in the field of practice, is in this: that a philosopher, looking on at this primitive competition, would not feel that he had any 'excess of nervous energy' to discharge. No resulting efflux pours along his motor nerves in the direction of his malar,

thoracic, and abdominal muscles; but, on the contrary, there is, if anything, a stimulus given to those portions of the muscular apparatus whereby we manifest a gentle depression of the spirits. And it then begins to dawn upon the philosopher that the analysis of humour can never be of much value as a basis for synthetical operations, having regard to the essentially subjective character of the ridiculous, and to the fact at that moment so importunately thrust upon him that what at one stage of the human intelligence may be found most potently laughter-moving, will at a higher stage prove absolutely incapable of exciting to merriment.

To console himself under these reflections, it is necessary that the philosopher should have in him what all philosophers have not, a dash of the humorist also. If he has, he will find that the scene is not wanting in food for genial mirth. To take but the most obvious of its suggestions, he may treat himself to an ample draught of that 'sudden glory' whereof we have been speaking. The yokels around him are laughing at Giles Joskin, but he will be laughing at the laughter of the yokels. While they are revelling in 'the sudden conception of their own eminency as compared with the infirmity' of a man who can grin in public through a horse-collar, he will be moved to mirth by the comparison of his own emi-

ency with the infirmity of men whom a man grinning in public through a horse-collar can amuse. But if he is a humorist of the truer and deeper sort, the scene of childish merriment will yield him more, much more, than this. The narrow, unsympathetic, contemptuous feeling of amusement, which is all that Hobbes took account of in his partially correct but wholly inadequate analysis of the 'passion of laughter,' will be of the shortest possible duration. A moment later, and he will think of the infinite intellectual interval, the innumerable gradations of refinement by which these clownish antics are divided from the satire of Swift or the irony of Voltaire, and the self-centred glory of superiority will give instant place to that strange, delightful, all-embracing sense of expansion and exaltation which suffuses our whole being when humour suddenly widens for us the horizons of the world.

And yet the broad buffooneries of the bumpkin and the subtlest strokes of the satirist are in their nature essentially one. The grin through the horse-collar is humour in the germ, and it has the pathetic interest of all rude beginnings. No doubt it is even further removed from the subtlety and finesse of the latest literary forms of humour than were the waggon and wine-lees of Thespis from the splendid equipment of the modern stage. But that is only

because its beginnings were immeasurably earlier in the history of human development than the birth of the drama. It may be that man began in the Stone Age to find amusement in any chance eminency over the infirmities of his fellows; to see another cut himself accidentally with a flint knife may have been the one great joke of the Palæolithic period. For, saddening as it may be to the sentimentalist to admit, the sense of humour must undoubtedly have had not a sympathetic but an anti-pathetic origin. We may take it as certain that the 'passion of laughter' in a Cave man was wholly and solely due to a sudden glory of superiority over some other Cave man; exultation in the fact that he was crippled or deformed, or for some reason or other *weaker* than the laugher, and therefore, should circumstances require it, his easy prey. Naturally it would take a good many æons to transform this attitude by a process of gradual modification to that (say) which is adopted by Stérne or an appreciative reader of Sterne towards the weaknesses of My Uncle Toby.

Very little progress had been made at any rate until after the heroic age of Greek poetry. The Homeric sense of humour, for instance, when you come to consider it, is quite in the stage of the country fair. Vulcan goes halting round the Olympian circle, cup in hand, in the absence of Ganymede,

and the lively gods break forth into peals of merriment. Did ever anyone see the like? This limping, ill-favoured blacksmith, grimy from his forge, to volunteer for the part of 'understudy' to the beautiful Idæan youth! What an exquisite joke! And so the 'inextinguishable laughter' of the immortals rolls on. How *naïf* again is the mirth of the Achæan chiefs when Ulysses canes Thersites on the hump with his baton for scurrility of language, and Thersites blubbers! It is evident, too, that Homer (or the Homeric Company) found matter of amusement in the personal aspect of the ill-conditioned railer. The poet dwells with relish on his squint, his hunched back, his strangely shaped and decorated skull—

Φοξὸς εἴν κεφαλὴν, ψεδνὴ δ' ἐπενήνοθε λάχνη—

'He had a sugar-loaf head with a thin stubble of hair sprouting from its apex.' There is quite a modern gust about this description; it almost anticipates the comic brutality with which human ugliness is treated by Smollett and humorists of his school. As a rule, too, one may say that physical infirmities and deformities were a good joke to the Roman of the classical era. Even Horace, an essentially good-natured little man, can snigger horribly over the *luridi dentes* and *capitis nives* of the superannuated Lyce, and indeed he congratulates the young men of

Rome generally on the excellent sport they must find in the contemplation of her ruined charms. The gods, he says, have prolonged her life to a raven's length of days, that our ardent youth might have the fun of seeing (*possent visere multo non sine risu*) the torch by which they once were kindled now smouldering in ashes. An 'Arry of the worst modern type would be incapable of jumping figuratively upon the most unworthy of 'Arriets in such a fashion as this.

We may say indeed that *not* to find food for mirth in the lowering misfortunes or disabling physical defects of others was distinctly exceptional with the ancients. It is with quite a shock of agreeable surprise that we find Persius speaking with contempt of a man who could taunt another on the loss of an eye — *lusco qui possit dicere, Lusce*. We are astonished at the magnanimity which could afford to neglect such an opening for pungent epigram, and feel that the poet must have been vastly in advance of his age. But in that idea of course there is a considerable mixture of egotistical self-deception. If we are to speak of mankind in the mass, and not of a certain small and highly-subtilized section of the human race, it would be perhaps wiser for us not to give ourselves too many airs over the country bumpkins gazing hilarious on the voluntary self-humiliation of

their clowning comrade. It is more than doubtful whether, for the great mass of humanity, the humorous has ever yet purged itself of this element of Aristotelian ἐπιχαιρεκακία, or 'joy at one's neighbours' ills;' whether, in other words, the multitude are even yet capable of being much amused except at the expense of their fellow-man. I do not see, indeed, how anyone can fail to appreciate the secular persistence of this element in the most popular forms of appeal to the sense of humour who merely considers the part played in fiction and drama, for many ages, by the deceived husband. From Boccaccio to Molière and Congreve, and from the comedians of the seventeenth century to the *farceurs* of the late nineteenth, the assumption that the unconscious dupe of the wife and the lover is essentially a ridiculous figure has immovably held its ground. That the person and situation have also been treated tragically is true but immaterial; it does not affect the significance of the fact that they *can* be, and for centuries have been, treated as a legitimate subject for comedy often of the most extravagant kind. Nor is it to the point that there has of late years been a much more prevalent inclination on the part of dramatists to treat the subject seriously. That unfortunately may only be a proof, not so much that our jokes have become more humane, as that a certain prominent, though not

numerous, section of us are getting too solemn to joke at all.

It is with the view, therefore, of warning the analytical humorist that the above retrospective sketch—cursory and imperfect as it is—of the history of humour has been attempted. The object of it is to remind him that, however skilled he may be in the subsumption of objects under concepts, people will only laugh at what amuses them; and that the question as to what does amuse them, has received, in different ages and among different peoples, a great variety of answers. Shakespeare, who, without being a professed and systematic analyst, stumbled occasionally upon analytic *aperçus* of no inconsiderable value, has made an often-quoted remark about the ‘fortunes of a jest’ lying in the ear that hears, rather than on the tongue that utters it; and this is a golden saying for all investigators of the psychology of humour. Our earnest pursuit of culture in these latter days has tended somewhat to obscure this truth. The humorous has been treated in too objective a spirit. It has been too easily assumed that it is a subject to be ‘got up’ like another; and it has been tackled with all the conscientious solemnity of the University Extension student. The result, of course, has been disappointing. It has been found that the ‘personal equation,’ even the ‘international

equation,' if I may say so, counts for a good deal more than the conscientiously solemn student had supposed.

The 'international equation.' Yes, the expression though strange is correct, and has been advisedly used. It recalls me to that part of my subject to which I briefly referred at the outset of these remarks—I mean the resolute, nay, the desperate attempt which has been made of late years to 'internationalise' jokes. It seems to have occurred to some earnest caterer for earnest students that for the benefit of those who propose to 'take up' humour, it would be an excellent and highly 'educational' thing to start a *Humour of the Nations* Series, if that is its name, and the idea has been carried out with a grim and smileless perseverance which has in itself a richly humorous effect. The editor and contributors of these mournful hand-books have apparently kept their countenances; perhaps they do not see the 'joke within the joke;' there could be no more delightful joke than that they should not. But to the philosopher who is also a humorist, the reception of the whole series, or at least of the volumes of it which have appeared so far, has been vastly diverting. The very first to appear was a staggerer, at any rate, to those who had not previously made the acquaintance at school of the *Scholasticus* of Hierocles. This, then, was the

humour of Ancient Greece. How was it to be received? Was it possible to receive it with any warmer or more hilarious emotion than that of the reverence due to its venerable old age? Earnest students were discovered in odd corners with this perplexing Attic salt-cellar in their hands. Aristophanes, they had heard, was a great humorist, and by studying him in translation they had been able, if not to provoke themselves to laughter, at least to find the spot at which at the Dionysia the laughter was supposed to come in. But where, O! where, was its point of entrance in the pages of this Athenian Joe Miller?

The *Humour of Ancient Greece* was followed, I believe, by that of Ancient Rome, and this again by the *Humour of Holland*. We are, or were, promised some time ago the *Humour of Scotland*, and the *Humour of Japan*; but I have never seen them, and I do not know whether they are or are not of high educational value. But the general effect of the series was very disturbing to the popular mind. It shook the public faith in the possibility of a Science of the Humorous; it spread far and wide a desolating sense of the relativity of all human jokes. For a time, too, it paralyzed the energies of the psychologist, who, in the very act of 'subsuming incongruous ideas under concepts which only apply to them from

one point of view,' was overtaken by a sort of agnostic despair. Why bother one's head with concepts? he asked himself. Why continue to subsume when the only result will be to produce a formula which, even if it applies, as is more than doubtful, to jokes that amuse the people of the Netherlands, may utterly fail as an analysis of such pleasantries as are acceptable to the Japanese? Mr. Lilly has been the first to recover from this temporary depression, and to philosophise calmly and even hopefully on this attractive subject once more. Perhaps he has not come across the *Humour of the Nations* Series, if that be its name.

Nothing, however, is to be gained by shutting our eyes to the disquieting outlook before us. So far from its being possible to 'internationalise' humour, we may think ourselves lucky if we can manage to preserve even a national type. The Dickensian humour, it would seem, is 'off'; the American droll, after a vogue of a good many years, is apparently ceasing to amuse; the 'inverted aphorism' had but a short popularity, and ultimately perished in calamitous and indeed unmentionable circumstances; and nothing seems growing up to take its place. The new generation 'knocking at the door' rat-tats with quite portentous gravity. This is, no doubt, an improvement on the older generations, who thought it a first-rate stroke of wit to wrench off the knocker;

but their successors are surely carrying a virtue to excess. It seems a pity that they should be unable to laugh; but the most respected and 'intellectual' among them cannot. It was the way of certain frivolous old fogies a few years ago to twit them with their supposed taste for what was then called the New Humour, but there was really no foundation for the taunt. The New Humour turned out to be simply the Old Buffoonery 'writ small,' and, whoever its patrons are or were, they are not to be found among the thoughtful young men who represent the generation with its hand on the door-knocker.

Altogether we seem to be within measurable distance of a time when nobody will be outwardly amused by the humour of anybody else; or when no one, at any rate, will be moved or movable to those mere muscular demonstrations of merriment which the ludicrous was wont to provoke. To 'shake the midriff,' I will not say of despair, but of mere indifference, will be a feat beyond the power of the most skilled and experienced jester to perform. He will think himself lucky if, by his most successful pleasantry, he shall succeed in illuminating the countenances of his younger hearers with a wintry smile. So far have we now got from the primitive simplicity of the horse-collar and its enshrined grin. It is not, of course, that jokes will be worse than they used to be. On the contrary, if there is anything in science,

they ought to be, scientifically speaking, better; for they will be the results of a synthesis based upon and starting from an analytic process, which will be brought ever nearer and nearer to perfection. That they fail to tickle will not be due to any want of the qualities necessary to titillatory power, but simply to loss of sensibility in the patient. The feathers are right enough; it is merely a chronic case of anæsthesia of the mental footsoles.

Of course, there will be consolations for the humorist; there are consolations already. The spectacle—(and spectacles)—of the earnest young man gravely studying comic masterpieces, this and the *Humour of the Nations* Series (if that is its right name) are distinctly in the nature of consolations. And on the final arrival of the time when, although jokes still continue to be made as psychological experiments, nobody any longer laughs at the jokes of anybody else, or even at his own, there is no doubt that a situation of an intensely humorous character will be created for all those—by that time it is to be feared but a dwindling minority—who are capable of appreciating it. The sense of humour, especially in the elderly, tends in these days to become continually more and more self-centred and egoistic; they see life—especially youthful life—around them more and more completely converting itself into a comedy which they have all to themselves, at least

if they may judge from the countenances of the actors; and it will be only a fitting termination to the process if one of them should find himself at last—like Campbell's *Last Man*, with a difference—alone in a world of humour of his own, enjoying the great Cosmic Joke in strict privacy amid many millions of earnest young men who do not see it, and deriving a subtle addition to his enjoyment from that very fact.

THE END.

